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Stopping the leaks

"Every President has been concerned about this problem," said David Gergen, White House communications director, referring to new rules to stop unauthorized disclosures of security information to the press. "Every President has taken remedial steps to deal with it. This President is attempting to do it," he said.

He should have noted the efforts of previous Chief Executives have had little success in this area and have served mainly to create a fortress mentality in the White House accentuating dangerously the adversary relationship between the press and the White House.

President Reagan, in his statement, acknowledged the Constitutional protection for freedom of speech and freedom of the press, but inherent in the policies announced is the philosophy that the public is not entitled to know many of the things its government is doing.

Not many members of the press would argue with the premise that some matters involving national security should not be released. However, in response to questions, White House officials failed to cite instances where publication of leaks have jeopardized our national security. Not many people will agree that the matter of selling or not selling military hardware to Taiwan is a good example.

So, what we have, is a situation where every government employe and official must ask permission to talk to a reporter or suffer the consequences of an FBI probe. Even an innocent luncheon with a reporter friend will be suspect. The ignominy of a lie detector test for suspected government employes was considered at one point before the rules were announced.

We don't think these rules will influence anyone who believes firmly either for political or moral reasons that the public should know some of the things being bottled up by government. But, sadly, it will create a "we" and "them" situation in which people who work for government are being asked to view "them" (the press) as the enemy.